

PREFACE

This first Reading Plan is called A General Introduction to the Great Books and to a Liberal Education.

What is a liberal education? It is easy to say what it is not. It is not specialized education, not vocational, avocational, professional or preprofessional. It is not an education that teaches a man how to do any specific thing.

I am tempted to say that it is the education that no American gets in an educational institution nowadays. We are all specialists now. Even early in high school we are told that we must begin to think how we are going to earn a living, and the prerequisites that are supposed to prepare us for that activity become more and more the ingredients of our educational diet. I am afraid we shall have to admit that the educational process in America is either a rather pleasant way of passing the time until we are ready to go to work, or a way of getting ready for some occupation, or a combination of the two. What is missing is education to be human beings, education to make the most of our human powers, education for our responsibilities as members of a democratic society, education for freedom.

This is what liberal education is. It is the education that prepares us to be free men. You have to have this education if you are going to be happy; for happiness consists in making the most of yourself. You have to have this education if you

are going to be a member of the community; for membership in the community implies the ability to communicate with others. You have to have this education if you are going to be an effective citizen of a democracy; for citizenship requires that you understand the world in which you live and that you do not leave your duties to be performed by others, living vicariously and vacuously on their virtue and intelligence. A free society is a society composed of free men. To be free you have to be educated for freedom. This means that you have to think; for the free man is one who thinks for himself. It means that you have to think, for example, about the aims of life and of organized society. These are the questions raised by this first Reading Plan.

Perhaps I should say a little more about communication and community. Every specialist is trained in the jargon of his specialty. The tendency of specialization is that it grows narrower and narrower. The old definition of a specialist as a man who knows more and more about less and less is only too correct. As specialties grow narrower, the field of communication of each specialist narrows, too. He can talk about his specialty in the language of that specialty, but unless he can find another specialist in precisely the same specialty, he must either be tongue-tied or become a dreadful bore, discoursing on the subject he knows about but that the members of his audience do not understand, and doing so in a language incomprehensible to them.

And this is not all. On matters of common interest, like the activities of the community, the specialist is cut off from communication. More and more we hear the phrase: "That is outside my field," even though the subject is one that may mean life or death to the commonwealth, like education, automation, inflation, and nuclear energy. The Constitution of the United States does not require that all citizens shall be experts in everything. But its major premise, without which the whole democratic structure must collapse, is that the people will be informed enough, intelligent enough, and interested enough to judge the policies proposed to them by those whom they have

chosen, with information, intelligence, and interest, to represent them.

The incentive to reading these books is not the acquisition of the formal proofs of education that Americans are accustomed to: credits, degrees, certificates, diplomas, etc. The incentive is simply your own desire to become as human as you can, for your own sake and that of your country. I have no doubt that you will become more "successful" in the usual definition of that term, because I cannot believe that it can be a handicap to a man to read and think and understand the tradition in which he lives. But whether or not you make more money and become more popular as a result of trying to acquire a liberal education, I can assure you that you will become a much more satisfactory companion to yourself.

Can you do it? Many people have. The discussion groups conducted by the Great Books Foundation for the last fifteen years have provided inspiration to hundreds of thousands of participants. Today at Aspen, Colorado, and in many business corporations numerous Americans have accepted seriously the obligation to understand the tradition of the Western world through these books.

Can you do it by yourself? The purpose of this Reading Plan is to help you overcome the natural diffidence of any modest person in facing so impressive a collection as this set of books. You will see that the problems they deal with are current today. You will observe that the language is not nearly so difficult as you may have been told it is. The ideas are important; but they are not ideas that you have never heard of or have never thought about. These books were not written for specialists in philosophy or political science or literature; they were written for ordinary people, and read by them until it became fashionable to say, as it has lately, that they are too difficult for ordinary people.

These books are teachers. They demand attention, but if the attention is given, they reward it. As you read on, you will find the reading easier, for one book leads to another.

These books are, I believe, the finest written creations of the

human mind. Our educational system largely disregards them. Even the names of some of the authors contained in this set are never mentioned in the presence of college students today. Yet these are the books that have made the world in which we live, and it is impossible to understand that world without understanding the principal positions taken in them.

A great adventure lies ahead of you as you take part in the Great Conversation.

Robert M. Hutchins